

Flying in Northern Laos

03/22/2006 4:35 PM

By: Mike LaDue

UPDATE: Messages concerning Mike LaDue and Harve Gulick

"Mike: I greatly enjoyed the letter, email, map, and pictures. It deepened my understanding of that part of Dad that I had very little knowledge. You are a very good writer.

Since you never saw dad after that time at the rehab center, I am going to fill you in briefly. Dad developed osteomyelitis in that right arm. After a great deal of medical care, they finally cured him. He was left with a stump below his elbow. He was then fitted with prosthesis. He tried one with an artificial hand. He finally went totally to the hook. He had an auto tag on the front of his car, which read "Captain Hook". He kept his sense of humor and drive. He almost gave up bowling. Instead his determination took over and he soon bowled a 300 with his left arm. He had to give up flying. He had dreamed of being an airline pilot. Instead he went into business for himself. His business was "Presto Pressure Cleaning". He put together a rig and did fine for many years. My brothers sometimes worked with him. He loved to party. We often had barbeque get-togethers at the Moose Lodge in Winter Haven, Fla. It was on the chain of lakes so we would then go fishing, skiing, or go to the tire ramp and watch the Cypress Garden shows with a bunch of other boaters. Dad divorced soon after returning from Laos. The other picture is of Dad and a very nice female friend. He went to a lot of single dances, etc. He was a good dancer. Sometimes he and a friend would meet my friends and me and we would do some country dancing. He had an intense zest for life and made it a point to have a lot of friends and acquaintances and to do those things he really enjoyed. He was in his early 70's when he died suddenly of a heart attack." (Ms. Chandler)

"I was wondering if you would care to let me forward the content of you last E-mail to me (bringing me up to date on the rest of your father's life) to the AA Association. I never do this with other's messages without permission, but it strikes me that some of the surviving A.A. Helio pilots might be interested in this information, and could possibly even wish to share their remembrances of times with your father." (moi)

"Mike: That is wonderful. Proceed. I want you to know something else. My mom and dad were divorced, after 20+ years of marriage, soon after dad returned from Laos. I had your letters, map, and pictures with me when I visited her in the nursing home yesterday. She is 80 years old, dying, and on hospice care. I told her of your letter and asked her if she would like to hear your words and see the map and pictures. She said yes. I read slowly where she could understand every word. I loved the look on her face. She was so touched. She said you must be a very wonderful man to take the time to write to me about something that may even cause you pain to think about. She mentioned that those were, after all, times of war. Then the thought comes to mind that, although Air America's work was very dangerous, it was about providing needed supplies in the war effort. Carol Gulick Chandler"

So, anyway, if the web site or the newsletter are short of things to include, that first letter, relating Harv's later life, might be of interest, and I am sure that Ms. Chandler (and her sister) would like to hear from any of the Helio guys who knew him & wish to contact her. Her E-mail address is:

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Mike LaDue

As to the general flying conditions in North Laos in March, they can be pretty dreadful, because it is what is known as "The Smoky Season;" this being a part of the "Dry Season," when the local mountain tribes, employing their age-old "slash & burn" techniques, set fire to potential farm fields, prior to planting seeds for rice or other crops. Air America's best chance to successfully reach the intended destination for each flight, was "visual terrain recognition" (we had no particular electronic technology up in the mountains) and this prevalent smoke, which was like a kind of vision-impeding fog, made things really tough at that time of the year. I flew as a crew member for Air America for three years (1962 - 1964) before joining the U.S. Government, and - like most of the other long-time pilots and crew - felt that I had come to know the majority (never all) of the mountains, air strips, helicopter pads, rivers and karsts (tall & sharp limestone outcroppings) in the area in which we were sent-off on our missions. But in (generally) March and April, this was of a lesser use, when the smoke was particularly present, because we couldn't see those land marks well from any great distance.

From what I have heard, your father had not been assigned to the Helio Program for very long. I used Helios & H-34's almost every day while based at Sam Thong/Long Tieng, and the date of our crash was the first time I had flown with him. He seemed to have no concern or questions when I briefed him about our upcoming flight to Muong Oum (LS-22) and Muong Cha (LS-113) - neither of which was a particular "tight" strip -and his his take-offs from Sam Thong, Muong Oum and Muong Cha were normal, as were his landings at Muong Oum and Muong Cha. We had intended to fly from Muong Cha back the way we had come; skirting Phu Bia Mountain to the south and west, but after the take-off from Muong Cha and a few circles to gain needed altitude in that valley, things went wrong.

The Helio Courier was/is a specialized type of light aircraft; it being amongst those which have "STOL" (short take-off/landing) capability. Most of this - in the Helio - comes from the use of a very high-lift wing design, which also employs four forward (two on each wing) metal "slats" - which automatically slide forward of the leading edge of the wing when certain low speed conditions exist (thereby "widening the lift capability of the wing), such as slowing down on final approach for a landing or on each take-off. It is also equipped with particularly large trailing edge wing flaps, which are raised and lowered by the pilot, by means of a crank, located on the inner roof of the cockpit.

It's body is constructed around a kind-of aluminum tube "cage" which is meant to protect the pilot/passengers in the event of a crash. I feel that had we experienced the 1965 crash an almost any other aircraft, none of us would have survived it. If I recall, the cage structure was is meant to remain unbent & undamaged at any point below 9 "G's" (nine times the the force of gravity, so that, for example, a 200 pound man would immediately weigh 1,800 pounds at point of impact), and you can see from the photographs of the crashed 865, our Helio exceeded that force when we hit the mountain. Being a specialized aircraft, it is not surprising that it was one which needed some extra time & attention on the part of the pilot, much like a fighter aircraft. All of the pilots in the Air America Helio Program were trained and checked-out by the program's chief pilot, and all those chief pilots & pilots were persons with whom I would surely fly, anywhere, anytime. In 1965, the Helio, Caribou (& H-34 helicopter pilots, who were headquartered in Udorn, Thailand) held a sort-of special place within Air America, because they had the day-to-day chance to actually land and take-off "up country" and so, were more knowledgeable about the terrain, the tribes and the requirements of the American field operations officers, with whom they worked closely.

Further, the landings and take-offs, in my opinion, could beat the pants off the rides of just about any carnival in terms of a thrill; the take-offs were just amazing insofar as to how fast

the craft would almost jump off the ground, and the landings were most often referred to as being "controlled crashes" (happily on the bird's very reinforced landing gear), usually with an attending large cloud of dust if the strip was dry. Helio flying was/is (someone is still making them, out in Prescott, Arizona and their web page is: www.helioaircraft.com) not for the faint of heart. Some pilots just didn't care for that sort of flying, and others just couldn't get enough of it. Some preferred to log time in multi-engine craft, so as to log that time in for future work with some more traditional airline or other. Others didn't care about that, and it was difficult to get them out of those unique small-but-almost-totally-agile, silver aircraft.

Back to our flight together, in reading over my long-ago ""Night on the Mountain" piece for the Air America Association, I find that it still holds up pretty well (the copied map of the area of interest reflects the interrupted return flight only, with that actual flight path in red and the intended/incompleted flight path indicated by a series of black dots). On take-off from Muong Cha, Harve did a few of circles to gain a safe altitude and we set off generally into the late afternoon sun and the smoke. I set about writing-up my Muong Ohm report, and didn't pay attention to the flight, until I heard Harve applying full power to the engine, at which time I could tell we were about to run out of air. I think one of us shouted "Tighten the (seat belt/shoulder harness) straps," or something like that, and then we were in the trees, and headed down, nose first. As for later, I don't know how he was able to lever me out of my pinned location on the right seat (Helio aircraft, for purposes of increased strength, only have a front seat access door on the pilot's [left] side, so he had to work the tree limb over his own former seat, in order to reach me on the other side of 865) with one arm broken in more than one place as I was later told. As for the night, it was much as I have written. I kept losing blood and wandered back and forth from being awake to being unconscious. The worst part was after we had been spotted by the search aircraft the following morning. The thought occurred to both of us (the Meo teacher being unconscious) that it would be just the worst thing, if a North Vietnamese or Pathet Lao Communist patrol happened to come upon us, right before we were about to be rescued, because in Laos, prisoners were rarely taken, and such a patrol would surely be in some degree of hurry, what with the sound of the rescue helicopters in their ears. We were in a really tight spot. It turned out that (the late) Dr. Charles Weldon's initial diagnosis of Harve and myself (which is attached) was slightly off the mark, but then, he was confronted at the crash site with little in the way of medical instruments, and three really beat-up people, covered with dirt, engine oil and blood, so that can be easily forgiven. He was one of the best-of-the-best out there, and did all he could as usual, when writing his initial casualty report, which became the essence of the cable which (Ambassador William) "Sullivan" quite properly, sent (It was actually written by USAID Director and another outstanding person, (the late Charles Mann) back to the Department of State in Washington, DC.

I have often been asked what caused that incident, and I really do not know. I was not a part of any incident investigation which may have been held and even today, I do not know the outcome, if any-such investigation was ever conducted. I don't even dwell on such a topic, feeling that anyone who flew for Air America, was almost surely, a well-trained, dependable, "stand-up" sort of person. If one were to sift through the concepts of such as "weather; the lack of visibility, fatigue (it was to be your father's last flight of the day, except to pick-up any passengers at San Thong and then fly down to Vientiane and go get dinner), area disorientation, a relatively new & specialized aircraft to pay attention to" and such as that, perhaps a true "cause" might be found (or not). I'm fine with the thought that it was just a consequence of "bush flying" of the most difficult sort, and in Laos, such things unhappily occurred, from time to time.

The 31st U.S. Army Field Hospital was/is located just off the main runway of the Nakhon Ratchasima (Korat) Royal Thai Air Force Base in Korat, Thailand, a sizable city about 100

miles north, northeast of Bangkok (although it is in a newer building now). In those days, it was located in a relatively small old medical warehouse building, built by the Japanese Army, when they occupied Thailand during WWII. It was made of wood with a tin roof, and had no air conditioning, which was rough, since March - June, when I was a patient there, we were in the worst of the Hot Season. Large floor fans & cold sponge baths (and later, showers) were our only means of staying cool. There was no TV and the only English radio transmissions arrived via short wave from Singapore (the BBC), Hong Kong and Australia, so we all, got a lot of book reading done, but were still, generally bored silly. All of the patients were U.S. Army and Air Force personnel and they looked upon me (and probably your father) and being particularly "spooky" in that we were civilians, and had little to say about just what we were doing there. Although I felt I received good treatment there, I was happy when it was decided that the time had come for me to be flown down to start my hydrotherapy/physical therapy recuperation, at the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital, in downtown Bangkok, where I would be able to stomp around the streets on crutches and a heavy metal leg brace, amongst the people and the sights of that exotic city.

My later short visit with your father back at the 31st Field Hospital, came about because I and one of my associates had driven earlier that week, down from Vientiane, Laos to Bangkok in a Volkswagen Bug, to get away from the war for a few days. We stopped on the way back to visit a friend of mine - an Air America Air Freight Specialist, who had been involved in a company C-123 crash at Long Tieng, and whom I had flown with from Sam Thong to Korat, earlier in the month, since I happened to be visiting at the Sam Thong hospital at the time that the survivors of that crash, were being flown in. I didn't even know that Harve was there, but just ran across him in the larger recuperation ward where I used to be. He appeared a bit depressed, because the healing he had been expecting on his already amputated arm, was not going as well as he had expected. I told him that he should apply to the Air America head office in Taipei, Taiwan, for a transfer to the much larger & relatively-modern Clark Air Force Base (The Philippines) Hospital at Angeles City, where I had recently gone to get an updated check-up in my right leg. I don't know if he did indeed do this, and I never saw him again.

Concerning Vientiane, where most-all of the Helio Pilots lived/worked when they were not on R & R in Hong Kong, The South Thailand beaches or some other Oriental knock-out vacation place, I still have a couple of (hopefully) quasi-humorous pieces on the Air America Association web site, entitled "Lido Nights" and, "April Fool's Day - Kong Le Style" which were written with the idea of trying to provide a slight hint as to how living in that small-but-"unique "third world" capital town was like. It was a real delight for me, and for most of us Air America, Bird & Son, Continental Air Services and Federal Government folks, so I expect that your father probably felt the same way. Though under the control of a mostly Communistic government now, I have heard that Vientiane is yet, much the same as always, and I am not surprised. As in the case of the land's people, Vientiane abides, and it endures.

Mike LaDue U.S. Government - Retired